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NEWS RELEASE

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MASSACHUSETTS STATE SOIL ON LOAN TO SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION FOR DIG IT! EXHIBITION

USDA LOANS DESIGNATED SOIL FOR EACH STATE AND TERRITORY

AMHERST, Mass. (July 29, 2008) — A little slice of Worcester County is now on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. A “monolith” of Paxton Fine Sandy Loam – the official Massachusetts state soil – is on loan to the museum from the U.S. Department of Agriculture along with 53 other designated state and territory soil samples in a new soils exhibition that opened on July 19 at the National Museum of Natural History.

The 5,000-square foot exhibition is called "Dig It! The Secrets of Soil." In addition to the soil samples, "Dig It!" also includes interactive displays, hands-on models and videos. The exhibition will be featured at the natural history museum for nearly two years.

The designated state soil samples—or monoliths—are part of a gallery of monoliths representing all the states, the District of Columbia, the Caribbean and the Pacific Islands. An extensive map created by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will offer visitors the "big picture" by allowing them to learn more about soils around the world.

The Massachusetts monolith was dug at the Buck Hill Conservation Center in Spencer several years ago. A monolith or soil profile, usually about six feet deep, shows the soil's natural layers. Its extraction from a soils pit is the first step in a lengthy process in creating a monolith, which is mounted and preserved. A soil monolith usually measures 48 by 8 inches.

In 1991, the Massachusetts State Legislature designated the Paxton series as the Official State Soil of the Commonwealth. The series was established in Worcester County in 1922 and is named for the town of Paxton where it was first described and mapped.

Paxton soils occur on about 400,000 acres of the 5.3 million acres in Massachusetts, predominantly throughout the state but excluding Cape Cod and the Islands. They are also mapped throughout southern New England and include portions of New Hampshire, New York and Vermont.

"This exhibition will remind the public of the importance of healthy and productive soils," said Christine S. Clarke, NRCS State Conservationist for Massachusetts. "Soils are a vital resource that should be protected. We need to do what we can to increase public awareness about their significance."

NRCS, USDA's lead agency for soil conservation, constructed the monoliths with assistance from many partners, including the Soil Science Society of America and the National Association of Conservation Districts. USDA first exhibited most of the monoliths at a centennial celebration of the soil survey on the National Mall in 1999

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The Paxton series consists of very deep, well-drained loamy soils on glacial till uplands. Paxton soils are well suited to cultivate crops, hay and improved pasture. Additional land uses include suburban housing and woodland.

The exhibition also explains how a soil is named. Each state has a designated soil that is represented by a soil series with special significance to a particular area. Of that number, 20 states, including Massachusetts, have recognized their representative state soil through official legislation.

Soils that share similar origins, as well as chemical and physical properties, are grouped and labeled as a soil series. Soil scientists usually name a soil series after a town or landmark in or near the area where the soil was first recognized. Representative soils also have been selected for Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Guam.

Through the use of its knowledgeable and skilled soils staff around the nation, USDA donated its technical expertise in soils to assist the museum in developing the exhibition. USDA-NRCS employees possess extensive knowledge of the nation's soils. The agency's soil scientists conduct soil surveys nationwide.

Those surveys are now available on the Internet. With a click of a mouse, anyone can access abundant soils information at http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov.

Additional information about "Dig It! The Secrets of Soil" can be found at http://forces.si.edu/soils. Information about USDA-NRCS's Soil Survey Program nationwide can be found at http://soils.usda.gov. Information about the "Dig It! tour can be found at http://www.sites.si.edu.

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